

BELMONT MILL, WATER TANK
(Nevada Belmont Mill)
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest
Approximately 7 miles south of U.S. Route 50 on USDA Forest
Service Road No. 623
Ely vicinity
White Pine County
Nevada

HAER NV-46-S
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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Location: Approximately 7 miles south of U.S. Route 50 on USDA Forest Service Road No. 623, Ely vicinity, White Pine County, Nevada.
U.S. Geological Survey, Seligman Canyon, Nevada, 7.5 Quadrangle (1992), Township 16 North, Range 57 East, Section 1.
UTM Zone 11, Easting 2061021.79, Northing 14267207.95 (center of structure) (NAD 83).
Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest Feature No. F16.

Significance: The Tonopah Belmont Development Company (TBDC) was one of the most important companies created during Nevada's early twentieth-century mining boom. As ore deposits in its central Nevada mines were depleted, the company sought new claims to resurrect its fortunes. In 1926 TBDC built the Belmont Mill near Hamilton to process lead and silver ore from its recently acquired claims in the White Pine mining district of eastern Nevada. The small pilot mill employed the most recent advances in table concentration and flotation mineral processing techniques, and the company erected numerous other buildings and structures to support the mining and milling work. The site was largely abandoned by TBDC after a few years, but later owners used the mill and associated structures for smaller operations. Water was crucial to both milling and domestic life, and the water tank provided the lifeblood of the site. Today, although most of the equipment has been removed, the Belmont Mill site is one of the only intact early twentieth-century mill complexes in eastern Nevada. The mill complex is a tangible reminder of the decline and failure of a once-powerful company and, thereby, of the boom and bust cycle so common in the mining industry. The subsequent modification and reuse of the site for small-scale operations typifies the ceaseless hum of optimism that sustains the mining industry.

Description: The water tank is located on the hillside about 325' north of the mill (NV-46-A) at an elevation close to Level 3 or 4 of that building. It was originally accessed by the road that begins in the canyon bottom and winds up the small drainage on the north end of the site. However, after at least one residence (NV-46-N) was sited on the roadbed in about 1926, the section between the residence and the water tank fell into disuse and the structure can now be approached only on foot over rough terrain. The walls of the tank have been removed completely although the floor and several associated structures remain partially in place. According to early accounts, the tank had a 75,000 capacity.¹

¹ Ely Daily Times, April 16, June 3, and July 26, 1926.

The water tank is circular in plan, 24' in diameter, with two rectangular equipment housings appended to the north and east sides. The tank has no visible foundation other than heavy 6" x 8" timbers that support the tank floor and walls; these are oriented north to south and set directly on the gravelly soil. The floor comprises boards oriented east to west that measure 10" wide x 2" thick. The walls comprise 2"-thick, vertical wood staves, trapezoidal in cross-section, that measure 5" on the exterior face and 4-1/2" on the interior face. The staves were bound with hoops of curved metal rods set at 6" intervals (judging from scars on the remaining staves). The tank was originally quite tall, perhaps as much as fifteen or twenty feet, but only the stubs of staves remain. There is no evidence that the tank had a roof or cover. There are, however, the remains of five sections of wood ladder lying on the floor of the tank; one or more ladders would have provided exterior and interior access to the tank.

The manner in which the tank functioned is not certain. However, it appears that water was delivered via pipeline from a spring almost five miles away and apparently poured into the top of the tank through the tall metal pipe that remains on the north side. This pipe gives an indication of the original tank height. At the base of the 3"-diameter pipe is a right-angled joint with a stop valve to control the flow of water into the tank. The valve is protected by a makeshift wood housing framed with vertical and horizontal boards and clad in sections of corrugated metal, measuring about 3' x 3'. The purpose of the second, white-painted pipe to the east is unclear, although its function appears similar to the first. Water apparently exited through a 4"-diameter pipe at the base of the tank's north-northeast side. This pipe enters a wood housing (of similar makeshift construction, measuring about 5' x 10') filled with dirt (perhaps to prevent the pipe from freezing and/or buttress it), makes a right-angled turn, and disappears below grade, presumably delivering water to the mill and other buildings via underground pipes.

History: See the Narrative Overview in HAER No. NV-46 for a broad contextual history.

TBDC built the 75,000-gallon wood water tank on the hillside behind the mill in 1926. Initial plans had called for water to be piped from Seligman Springs, five miles away on the west slope of the White Pine Mountains, but ultimately it was taken from the "California mill springs" to the east. The pipeline was surveyed in early June and, in late July, TBDC signed a 15-year agreement for the use of water from the springs not only for milling and domestic purposes but for fire protection as well. A delay in receiving three miles of three-inch pipe for the water line postponed the opening of the mill until mid-August, but ultimately four and one-half miles of pipeline were laid to transport the water to the tank. In addition, four watering troughs with automatic valves were provided along the line to water the cattle in the area.² A ca. 1940 photograph provides a view of many of the mill site buildings, including the water tank behind the mill (see Figure 4 in HAER No. NV-46).

² Ely Daily Times, April 16, June 3, July 14, and July 26, 1926.

The tank remained in use and the water system functional in the 1960s. At the time, it was reported that the boardinghouse (NV-46-I) had running water and indoor toilets. After the boarders left in the fall, the site's caretaker, Ermyl Dowd remained through the winter. The water system was shut off for the season and all domestic water had to be brought in.³ Ron Jordan, an Ely resident who worked for the county road maintenance department in the late 1960s and early 1970s, recalls clearing the road in the winter and stopping at Mrs. Dowd's to use the telephone. As he remembers it, the mill was used fitfully in the late 1960s but little or not at all after 1967. He attributed this to a lack of material to put through the mill, but also recalled that in some years there was insufficient water from the California Mill springs to operate it.⁴

As the mine and mill fell into complete disuse in the 1970s, it seems likely that the water system was no longer maintained and that it fell into disrepair. Between about 1980 (after a caretaker was no longer employed) and the present, the wood tank was almost completely dismantled and the staves removed from the site, leaving only the floor of the tank and a heap of metal hoops. Presently the remains of the water tank are in poor condition and become more difficult to interpret as the structure continues to deteriorate and materials are displaced or removed.

Sources: See HAER No. NV-46.

Historian: Anne Oliver, Principal, Oliver Conservation Group. Fieldwork for the project was conducted in the fall of 2010. Project documentation was accepted by HABS/HAER in 2011.

Project Information: See HAER No. NV-46 for complete details. In summary, this project was completed under a contract between the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest and a consulting team under the direction of ajc architects (Salt Lake City, Utah), in consultation with the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office. The project historian was Anne Oliver, historic preservation consultant with Oliver Conservation Group. Matt Wallace, intern architect with ajc architects, was responsible for the architectural measured drawings and completed all fieldwork and final drawings with the assistance of Oliver Smith Callis, draftsman. The photography was produced by Steve Tregeagle Photography under the direction of Steve Tregeagle and with the assistance of Heath Brown.

³ Interview with Hal (Rod) Jensen, Jr., 1 October 2010.

⁴ Interview with Ronald Jordan, 29 September 2010.